

Sermon: Life-Giving Rules

(Preached by Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, March 7, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

At the height of the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, which was really not that long ago, we saw in the news of the problem of vaccine tourism. Not those who flew down to sunny destinations for a bit of R&R, which interestingly evokes in us a curious mix of both indignation and envy. No, what I am referring to are those select few, who flew out of the country, or to a region they were not supposed to, just so they could get a vaccine shot.

There was the case of the CEO of the Great Canadian Gaming Corp and his actress wife, who flew up to a remote community in the Yukon Territory. They pretended to be motel workers from out-of-town in order to receive the COVID-19 vaccines, that were very much in short supply. There was also the case of the head of Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, who flew to Dubai with his partner, purportedly for personal reason and were subsequently vaccinated.

In both of these cases, their questionable actions drew some harsh criticism in the media, and equally harsh rebuke from their respective place of employment. Both are now finding themselves out of work. Just to be clear, they get no sympathy from me, as they had abused their privileged positions for their own personal gains.

However, I do want to point out that they at least recognize what those COVID-19 vaccines represent, something that permits them a greater degree of freedom, something that is life-saving, something worth paying a price for (and indeed they paid a very high price personally). So I want to put to you this question, if you have something life-saving, even life-giving, something that will permit you a great degree of freedom, what price are you willing to pay?

With that in mind, I would like to turn our attention to our lectionary reading this week, on the third Sunday of Lent, particularly the passage of Exodus 20:1-17, so called the Ten Commandments. These commandments were given by God to Moses, on top of Mont Sinai, etched

onto two stone tablets. Before the Law was given to the Israelites, the people of God were reminded in verse 2, that “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

This prior deliverance was not simply an act of mercy, even though God did hear their cry and had compassion on them. This prior grace was really a demonstration of God’s covenantal faithfulness, of the covenant that God first made with Abraham. As a continuation of that individual covenant, God was now ready to make another covenant with the entire community of Israel.

I won’t go into details of the Ten Commandments, as each commandment could probably take up the length of a stand-alone sermon to explicate. I will say that the first four commandments are primarily concerned with people’s relationship to God, and the remaining six are concerned with people’s relationship with each other. Although individuals are called upon to observe these commandments strictly, the true beneficiary is the entire community of faith.

Let me use the example of wearing mask during COVID. Early in the pandemic, our public health officials openly questioned the value of the general public wearing masks, be it N-95, surgical or simple cloth mask. They gave various reasons as to why it is not necessary — masks are ineffective, they may cross-contaminate, wearing them by general public is a waste of PPE resource.

There is a distinct cultural difference between the West and the East. Asian countries were much more ready to accept mask-wearing than the Western countries. My own theory of this difference is due to how each culture celebrates its heroes or superheroes. In the West, mask-wearing heroes are more likely to cover their eyes — think Batman or the Three Musketeers. In the East, mask-wearing heroes are more likely to cover their mouth — think Ninjas or various Kung-fu masters.

As more pandemic related data becomes available, as the science of COVID-19 infection evolves, it became clear that mask-wearing vastly reduces the transmission of all air-borne viruses. From a communal point of view, it is absolutely beneficial, essential some would put it.

However, objections persisted from anti-maskers, mostly on the ground that enforcing mask wearing is a violation of their personal right, their personal freedom. They are correct, as a matter of fact. But what we are seeing from a communal point of view, is that in those communities with high anti-making sentiment, they have higher COVID-19 infection rate, thus

correspondingly much higher death rate. Individual rights and freedom are important, but society as a whole has always seen fit to limit those rights and freedom, especially when they begin to harm others.

When God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites, God must have that in mind. These commandments are restrictive, from an individualistic viewpoint but from a communal viewpoint, especially from a community of faith:

“the Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”

(Psalm 19:7-10)

For the people of God, the Ten Commandments and the entirety of the Law of Moses (or the Torah in Hebrew) is precious in their eyes. Yet, Apostle Paul understood that Law is somewhat lacking, incomplete.

Paul had described himself in Philippians 3:5, as “a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee”. He studied under the great Jewish rabbi Gamaliel, and he knew the Torah intimately. He also knew that the strict application of the Law in his time, had not brought life, but only guilt, condemnation and death. It had led him down the path of persecuting the early church, killing scores of followers of Jesus. On that road to Damascus, he had an encounter with the risen Christ. It took him a while to fully grasp the meaning of that encounter, but when he did, he became transformed, fully alive.

Paul knew that the message of the cross, of the Christ crucified, resurrected, and now glorified may come across as foolishness to many (especially to those who are perishing), but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.

Message of the cross, what should I compare it to? Well, since I am already down this rabbit hole of using the COVID-19 pandemic as sermon illustration, I might as well keep going. So, let me offer you this thought — message of the cross is like a vaccine. Mask-wearing maybe death-

preventing, vaccines are life-saving, even life-giving. A world that is ravaged by the pandemic needs a well-reasoned, well-structured health protocols, rules that prevent unnecessary deaths. However, more rules and more protocols will not get us out of a pandemic, only vaccines could.

It is the same way with the message of the cross. Christ Jesus our Lord teaches us about love. He neatly summarizes the totality of the Torah as love — “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39). To this commandment to love, Jesus added, “love one another: just as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

How then has Christ loved us, you ask? Christ Jesus takes it to the extreme, he took it to the cross, and died for our sins, in radical and complete obedience to God. The community of faith would later interpret that sacrificial love from a trinitarian theology, as the Triune God sacrificing the God-self on that cross.

Some anti-crosser will object, they will say that is utter nonsense, total foolishness. Yet, God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. The message of the cross is the love of God, in its finest. Not all will believe, not all need to believe, just like not all need to be vaccinated. For whoever believes in Christ, in the message of the cross should not perish but have eternal life. One by one, as each individual is saved, when that herd immunity is reached, our society as a whole is thus liberated, transformed and free.

So get yourselves vaccinated, when it is your turn, and believe in the Good News of the Gospel, in the message of the cross.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.